

A sermon preached Maple Street Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
Danvers, MA
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Acts 19:1-7

Fellow Travelers Within the Mystery of God

Remember that old *Coca-Cola* advertising motto, “It’s the REAL thing?” We would see it on billboards and hear it on the radio and see it on TV. What do you think the Coke Company was trying to tell us? Well, I suspect they were probably, in a not-so-subtle manner telling us the *Pepsi* was a fake, or just not as tasty. If you want the real, original cola, go with Coke. I think when *Coca-Cola* came out with that ditty it might have been the launch, or maybe first real escalation of, the cola wars that have been raging through the ad campaigns ever since. *Coca-Cola* is banking that we all want the genuine article. No pretenders for us.

We read about the apostle Paul this morning and he is out there doing his apostle thing—preaching and converting folks to Christ. And just so we know that Paul is the real thing, the writer of Acts lets us know that Paul is coming down off the mountain, just like Moses, and the prophets, and Jesus always did when doing their work for God. Whenever someone in the scriptures comes down off the mountain it means they have been communing with the higher power and are about to teach those down below something profound.

When Paul comes down from his high place, he happens to bump into some disciples. Note that the passage from Acts doesn’t say “disciples of Jesus,” but rather simply “disciples.” At that moment we don’t really know whose disciples they are. If we assumed they were disciples of Jesus we would be wrong; nope, these were disciples of John the Baptist, we find out. And just like *Pepsi*, Paul decides these poor folks are not the real thing, the genuine article. They lack that *certain something more* within them. They are kind of stuck in a pre-spirit of Jesus phase and Paul is arriving just at the right time to save them.

Folks, we may think that advertising is a relatively modern thing, but this passage from Acts is a pretty effective message for the spreading of Paul’s particular path to be a follower of Christ. If there is one thing that I believe to be true about our Bible it is that every page, every paragraph, every sentence, and indeed, every word is there for a purpose; actually it’s probably there for multiple, layered purposes. And if we are to read the Bible correctly, we have to read it in the context in which it was written, and get beneath the words on the page.

In Paul’s day there was great competition not only between the synagogue and the followers of the new prophet called Jesus the Christ, but within different sects within the

followers of Jesus Christ. One of the competitions early on was between Paul and Peter with Paul calling for greater freedom and modernization of what it takes to follow the Jewish Jesus and Peter campaigning for passing through Judaism first on your way to being a follower of Jesus. There was also the competition between disciples of John the Baptist and the disciples of Jesus. Our Bible, our sacred scriptures, are not immune from participating in the fine art of persuasion by various camps within our Judeo-Christian theological and ecclesial heritage. I'm not saying this to imply that our scriptures are any less important, I only want you to know the history behind them so your discernment about your faith and how scripture informs it are grounded in a historical context.

The proliferation of Jewish and Christian denominations and movements down throughout our history are a testament to the multiple and numerous persuasive messages and interpretations that prophets and pastors and rabbis and ministers and evangelists have espoused all in the name of trying to figure out just how to be in relationship with this incredible mystery we all call God, or Elohim, or Allah, or Adonai. My friends, we must face the fact—both historical and theological—that there are a lot of human nature and persuasive techniques of language that have pervaded religious language and teachings ever since the beginning of time. In fact, when the beginning of time actually was is still debated by us today!

Folks, a lot of what we hear in religious circles is *persuasive language*. True, religious and theological language deals with much more critical and substantive matters—even matters of giving life or death—than which cola happens to taste better, but nevertheless, words of scripture, words of sermons, and words of persuasive religious language are all chosen very carefully and given for a purpose (the purpose may be to comfort, challenge, forgive, or persuade). It's not a bad thing, nor a trivial thing. And let me say this, religious scripture is there to challenge and teach us; scripture is not meant to be idolized. (*And let me say here: if what I am preaching ever troubles you, come and talk with me. My job sometimes is to challenge you, too. And if you get upset with what I am saying, ask yourself why that makes you upset; where does that discomfort come from?*)

I want to say something to you all right here and right now, and you won't often hear the evangelists and preachers of the day exclaim this: I do not know what God's full truth is; just because I went to seminary, studied and continue to study the Bible, and am an ordained minister in the UCC, I know that God and God's truth is so much more than I will ever know this side of eternity; and, yes, God is *still speaking*. All the theologians in the world don't know it all. And when we preachers and so-called religious authorities sound so sure and leave no room for God's mystery and God's dynamic nature we are doing you a disservice.

The best I can do for you as your preacher and teacher is to give you my best stab at what the scriptures and life stories we all experience are telling us. Ultimately, we all have to discern for ourselves what to believe. It really is a choice. We really do have a choice. And, it's okay to choose. We all need some guiding principles to live and act by

in our lives and to help us be in relationship with one another. For me, the principles I choose to believe about God are these: God is ultimately a mystery and no one human has all the answers; God is love and when religion strays from doing the loving thing, then I believe it gets off track; God is just and equitable and when society and religion stray from that they are not serving the God I choose to believe in; God is merciful and loves forgiveness and mercy more than punishment, and again, God is a mystery and that humbles me. And, I know that I am just another traveler on this rocky road to finding union with God along with a whole lot of other people throughout the world and I would rather try to learn from all those fellow travelers than be their judge. God's mystery, my friends, is the real thing. Amen.

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